

Thoroughbred horses and cowboy hats, racing cars and exotic locales, glamour queens and swinging melodies... All trade marks of the swashbuckling Feroz Khan! The struggling action hero turned passionate filmmaker infused Indian cinema with a distinct flavour of the West... And he did it with panache!

CINÉ BLITZ meets the man who persists with the same gusto.

[Feroz Khan] enjoys creating an ambience. We are seated in his snug, comfortably lit office when he directs a remote control to the music system across the table. The cadence of a soft symphony fills the room. "Let's be casual," suggests the affable Khan lounging in his chair.

We congratulate him on his Filmfare Lifetime Achievement award. How does he feel? "Very happy but also very responsible. It's a very nostalgic sentiment, winning a Lifetime Achievement award," he says dreamily.

What changes has he noticed in the film industry over the years?

"Commercialism existed even in those days but there was a certain degree of professionalism, then. Professionalism cannot become outdated! Today it's become a one way street. An actor should remember that he is doing a job, which he is getting paid for, which he should perform to the best of his ability and at the convenience of his employer. But that doesn't happen here. Professionalism in the film industry down South is much higher as compared to Mumbai! The stars in Chennai work in only 2 to 3 films a year, which Fardeen is gearing up to do. He has quite a few films in hand and he's phasing them out now. Even the filmmakers here are not able to shoot a film at a stretch because of paucity of dates."

Getting nostalgic, he recounts how early in his career he had lost Ravi Nagaich's *Parz* to Jeetendra. The super hit film made Jeetendra a star but Feroz let the opportunity pass by as a matter of scruples. "I didn't take on the film because it necessitated double shifts and it clashed with some other film dates which I had promised," he explains.

Feroz later starred in Nagaich's *Kala Sona*, which also was a hit. "I did do double shifts in those days for a period of two months at a stretch. But the commitment was very, very strong. Today, commitment has no meaning. It has become a money game. Budgets went haywire, business increased, television came, satellite rights came about... Obviously, when you spin over, you are going to splash water around!" he avers.

Over forty years ago, the lure of the silver screen led a handsome and determined Feroz to leave his home in Bangalore and seek his fortune in Mumbai. After struggling for months, he bagged lead roles in the stunt films of the Wadia brothers. He was stuck in B-grade action films like *Reporter Raju* (1962) and *Ek Sapera Ek Lutera* (1965) till *Safar* (1970) happened. His work with the reigning superstar Rajesh Khanna was noticed

and soon followed *Aadmi Aur Insaan* with Dharmie *Aarzoo* with jubilee hero Rajendra Kumar and a neg role with younger brother Sanjay Khan in *Mela*. However, instead of consolidating his position as an actor, Feroz chose to turn filmmaker.

"Every actor dreams of becoming a director but one out of ten have the conviction. I learnt much from the different directors I had worked with... camera angles, their handling of characters, the treatment. In my earlier films, I would go and tell the film editor, 'Why don't you make the shot this way?' This was when I had started off with the Wadia brothers at the rate of Rs. 1000 a month. The editor would get irritated and retort, 'Saala Feroz tum humko sikhatu hai, hum tumhara role katwa degal!' That was the kind of interest I had in direction," he laughs. "I worked 10 years as an actor before I wielded the megaphone for *Apradh* (1972)."

After this hit came *Dharmatma* and *Qurbani*, both super hits. Surprisingly, in the span of 30 years of his career as a filmmaker, Feroz has made only 7 films. "I've made films on my own terms, at my own pace, working passionately and also taking time off. I've worked with the best of heroines but I've never had date problems."

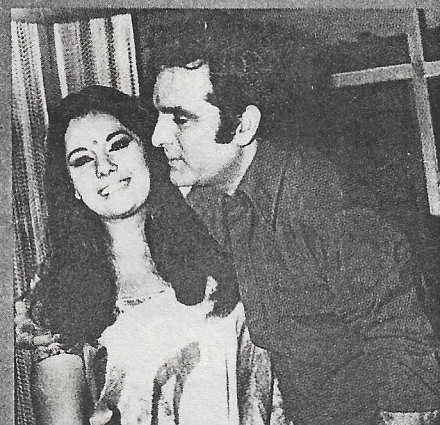
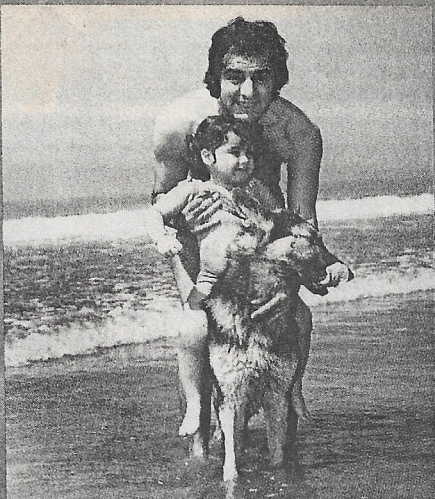
Which brings us to an important feature of his films – the glamour queens! Was the choice of these leading ladies deliberate?

He bursts into laughter. "They suited their roles," he says defensively. "Mumtaz was seen in a bikini for the first time in *Apradh*. She was my favourite heroine and we did three films together. Hema, people say, has never looked as beautiful as she did in *Dharmatma*. Zeenat, of course, was

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The Inimitable Feroz Khan!



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a very sensuous looking girl. I picked the women who suited these roles and at the same time they happened to be stars! Madhuri was not a star when I picked her for *Dayavan*. Subhash Ghai had introduced her but she was just spreading her wings when I chose her. Also, when I chose Manisha for *Yalgaar*, she was just coming up. A filmmaker's first choice should be a person who suits the role. Star value comes second. If I were to find a new girl who was talented and showed promise I wouldn't mind signing her on. I could have signed anyone on for *Prem Aggan* but I chose a new girl, Meghna," he adds.

So, was he happy with Meghna's performance?

He smiles sheepishly. "Well, it was my choice. The credit or discredit goes to me and I accept it."

What went wrong with *Prem Aggan*? It didn't seem like a Feroz Khan film. "That's what everybody says! But you cannot have a winner all the time. I have gone over it and in retrospect, I have realised certain aspects where I did go wrong. But there were other external factors, which also went against the film. After ten years, if someone sees the film they might say, 'Well, it was not such a bad film!' You live and learn. It's part of the game."

How did Fardeen feel about the failure of his debut film?

"My stand is vindicated. He won the Filmfare award for Best New Face. He wouldn't have won the award if he wasn't noticed. Emotionally, I would have liked this film to be the biggest hit but it wasn't to be. Fardeen was disappointed but he kept mum."

Do star sons have it easy?

"A star son will get the initial push but if he doesn't have it, it could work to his disadvantage. There is so much competition now," he points out. "Earlier, newcomers were rare; it was very difficult to get a break. Today, with the kind of competition around, you've got to have the talent! Luck is when opportunity meets preparation. If Fardeen didn't have the talent, he would have been written off in *Jungle*. You can sign a couple of films and carry on, but in the long run, the talent will tell. You can't sustain otherwise!" he stresses.

The westerly trailblazer that he was, Feroz ushered in the era of the suave, gun-totting, swaggering hero. From acting to filmmaking, he has done everything with elan. "Well, I was always myself in the roles I got. I was called a 'stylised' actor. Maybe I dressed that way. I don't know what it is," he shrugs and smiles. "But I have always been an outdoors man, driving fast cars, participating in races and enjoying a good measure of the company of the fairer sex," he laughs.

"I was brought up in Bangalore, in a very Christian oriented milieu. There were a lot of English and Anglo-Indian boys in the school I went to and hence my accent. Besides, I have always liked an artistic representation of everything. I don't like to shoot in a bad location. However, I did go in reverse gear when I did *Dayavan*. I proved that I'm also capable of shooting a film in the absence of westernised sets or actors!" he adds.

The strains of the orchestra resonate louder and Feroz reveals, "I love music but I can't read music. Fortunately, all the sounds that I liked have clicked. I don't play any instrument, other than a bit of bongo. I believe in simple poetry and melody. Sometimes, when I chill out at my Bangalore farm, I play my classical music collection, Tchaikovsky, Beethoven and others, at full blast!"

Didn't he miss acting?

"The love for all technical aspects of filmmaking gradually took over and the actor retreated. It started with *Dayavan* when I opted for a smaller role. I thought that Vinod Khanna could play the romantic parts better than I could. I got a lot of fan mail asking why I didn't do the role and I think I could have pulled it off. But Vinod has done a great job in the film, perhaps the best performance of his career. In *Yalgaar* too, I had a character role. Of course, I couldn't play a hero anymore. In *Prem Aggan*, I didn't act. Probably that's why it didn't work!" he bursts out laughing again. On a serious note he adds, "But there was a bit of disappointment for the audience. I think the viewers wanted to see the father and son together." So will he star in his next film? He shrugs, smiling enigmatically.

On the personal front, Feroz has chosen to be a nonconformist. He parted ways with wife Sundari Khan 18 years ago and never remarried. The two remain friends and in fact, still reside in the same house. How did he balance his family life?

"My divorce never came in the way of our family ties. We both respect each other. I have another home in Bangalore and I spend half my time there. But whenever I'm in Mumbai, we are in the same house. She lives upstairs and I, downstairs. We always meet. Hats off to her too that our kids never felt torn or dejected.

"We grow out of relationships and step out. Yes, I had my flings. I have had beautiful relationships with many lovely ladies. I have cherished memories of them. But I have never forgotten my priorities!" he says.

As a father, Feroz is more comfortable being a friend than a figure of authority. "I respect Fardeen's independence and I expect him to respect mine. It's not a mushy father and son relationship. The love is never lost. We discuss women, movies, sex or anything under the sun.

"In my young age, I was like a frog in a well. I knew my father loved me but he was very strict. I was always very friendly with my kids. In fact, my daughter Laila, Fardeen and I would shower together till they were 8 or 9 years old. Then she started shying away and he also in another year or two. Earlier, it was something natural. We'd feel nothing about it," he fondly recalls.

According to Feroz, academic qualification was a must have for his children. "I wanted them to have education. I'm a high school dropout. Whatever I have imbibed in life is through reading. My only regret is that I did not have academic education. I'm very happy that both my children are graduates."

Were his children the reason why he never remarried?

"No, I'd be lying if I said that," he admits honestly. "Besides, I believe that you are either married or happy. You can't be both!" he says cheekily and guffaws. "I've had a personal experience and once is enough. Not that

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I'm bitter about the experience. Believe me, she was a wonderful person and as long as it lasted, it was great. But as Jonathan Livingston Seagull says, 'You are not born into this world to live up to my expectation and I'm not born into this world to live up to yours. You are you and I am I and if we ever meet, it's beautiful!'

Did he become too accustomed to independent living or was he never captivated enough to marry again? "Could be either way! I've always believed that a man is as young as he feels and a woman is as old as she looks. You never know. There is always a tomorrow. I won't fight it!" he says grinning from ear to ear.

What does he make of love?

"Love is giving without expecting. That's romantic! It has been possible in the classics and that's why they have remained classics," he says citing instances of Romeo-Juliet, Heer-Ranjha, Shiri-Farhad. "The gamut of love is very difficult to analyse. If love is not giving then it becomes selfish and love is selfless. The moment any kind of desire or expectation comes in, it becomes an agreement; it loses its poetry, its aura. Marriage is an expectation. When you love somebody, possession starts coming in. Very few people experience unconditional loving, but that is the ideal!" avers the dreamy soul.

As a parting shot, we teasingly ask him to send us an invite if he ever changes his mind about marriage. "Most certainly!" comes the sporting rejoinder.

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